



# The Keys to a Successful Catholic School

*Elementary Advancement Solutions(R)*

John Mihalyo, President & Founder

*"This framework is not about doing everything at once.  
It is about leading the right work at the right time."*

John Mihalyo, President, Elementary Advancement Solutions

# The Roadmap

There are over 6,000 Catholic schools in the United States. The roadmap you are holding is built on 20 years of Catholic school leadership experience, not theory. It reflects tried and true data, real results, and the lived reality of leading a Catholic school through every season of the year.

This framework draws from the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS), the Baldrige Excellence Framework for Education, and the direct experience of John Mihalyo, Catholic school principal, founder of Elementary Advancement Solutions, and a sought-after speaker at dioceses across the country. These are not borrowed ideas. They are principles that have been tested, refined, and proven in Catholic schools just like yours.

Each section that follows includes reflection questions to help you benchmark your school. These are not checklists for perfection. They are invitations for honest conversation with your leadership team, your faculty, and your community.

<b>Catholic Culture &amp; Identity</b>	The cornerstone of every Catholic school. When Christ is truly at the center of the school, in the hallways, the classrooms, and in every decision, everything else follows. Without it, a school is simply private, not Catholic.
<b>Community Engagement</b>	Engaged communities do more than show up to pay tuition. They take ownership of the school and its mission. True engagement means parents, alumni, and parish partners are invested before, during, and long after their time at the school.
<b>Faculty &amp; Workforce</b>	Every person on campus carries the mission of the school. A strong workforce is hired for mission alignment, developed intentionally, and celebrated for their vocation.
<b>Individual Student Growth</b>	Success is not everyone getting an A. It is every student growing academically, morally, spiritually, and socially from where they started.
<b>Operational Vitality</b>	A school cannot fulfill its mission if it cannot sustain itself. Strong operations include enrollment strategy, fundraising, financial planning, and communication to keep the mission moving forward.
<b>Leadership</b>	Shared vision drives shared success. Every leader on campus, including principals, pastors, boards, parent organizations, coaches, and teacher leaders, must be aligned and moving in the same direction.

# 1. Catholic Culture & Identity

*The Cornerstone of Every Catholic School*

Catholic Culture & Identity sits at the center of every outstanding Catholic school and at the center of every EAS framework. It is what distinguishes a Catholic school from a private school. Without it, all the operational systems and community events in the world cannot produce a truly Catholic education.

Many schools focus on "Catholic Identity," which is important, but Catholic Culture is broader. It encompasses the living practice of the Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching (USCCB), a school environment where the presence of Christ is unmistakably central within the first fifteen seconds of walking through the door, and a community where every faculty member takes an active leadership role in nurturing and protecting the school's faith culture.

A thriving Catholic school goes far beyond weekly Mass attendance. It means Confession is scheduled for students and faculty. It means students participate in retreats to deepen their faith. It means a priest is visibly present and pastorally engaged, not just at liturgy, but in the hallways, in conversations, and in the life of the school. It means prayer is woven into every classroom, every day, every decision.

## KEY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ☒ Does your mission statement place Christ unmistakably at the center?
- ☒ Is the school's Catholic identity visible within 15 seconds of entering?
- ☒ Does the school come together frequently for Mass beyond Holy Days?
- ☒ Is a priest visibly present in school life beyond Mass?
- ☒ Are the sacraments integrated into student and faculty life?
- ☒ Do students and faculty participate in retreats annually?
- ☒ Do classes begin with prayer?
- ☒ Do teachers and students live the faith and weave it into everything they are teaching and being taught?
- ☒ Are families invited to attend school Mass?
- ☒ Is the school active in the life of the parish?
- ☒ Do parishioners feel part of the school, or are the school and parish seen as two independent entities?
- ☒ Is service and outreach apparent in the life of the school?

## 2. Community Engagement

*True Engagement Goes Deeper Than Involvement*

EAS uses the word "engagement" deliberately and it matters. When a community is merely involved, parents attend events and participate in select activities. When a community is truly engaged, parents become active partners who are deeply invested in the school before, during, and after their time there. An engaged community wholly owns the school and that ownership drives sustained growth. The first question every school should ask is this: do we only reach out to our community when we need something, or do we actively seek to partner with our parents, alumni, students, and local parishes in the life of the school?

Building authentic engagement requires balance and intentionality. If a school only asks families to work, fundraise, volunteer, and serve, community fatigue sets in quickly. If the school only offers social events, engagement stays shallow. The most effective schools intentionally mix mission-driven work with genuine celebration and fun. Every event should have a clear purpose, and schools should conduct post-event reviews to honestly assess whether that purpose was achieved and whether the community was truly engaged or simply in attendance.

Strong community engagement also means proactive, consistent, and transparent communication. Families should never feel out of the loop. Communication outlets should promote the mission of the school, not just the maintenance of it. Volunteers should be celebrated and recognized publicly. Events should be low or no cost on campus to ensure all families can participate. And engagement does not end when a family graduates. Alumni, past parents, and the wider parish community are all part of a school's story and should be treated as ongoing partners in its future.

### KEY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ☒ Are parents welcomed and engaged beyond when the school needs something?
- ☒ Are parents and faculty given the chance to provide input into how the school engages its community?
- ☒ Is the school effectively using social media to showcase what is happening inside and outside the classroom?
- ☒ Are volunteers celebrated and recognized for their contributions?
- ☒ Does the school communicate upcoming events in a timely manner to maximize family participation?
- ☒ When the school holds functions on campus, are they low or no cost to encourage all families to attend?
- ☒ Are post-event audits conducted to assess whether the purpose of the event was achieved?
- ☒ Does the school use its communication outlets to promote the mission, not just the maintenance of the school?
- ☒ Are alumni and past families actively engaged as ongoing partners in the school's future?

## 3. Faculty & Workforce

*Every Person Carries the Mission*

The word "workforce" is chosen intentionally in the EAS framework. It includes every person who serves the school: administrators, teachers, office staff, custodians, kitchen staff, and before and after care workers. Each of these roles contributes to the culture students experience every day. A school's workforce is not just its teaching staff, it is every person a student, parent, or visitor encounters from the moment they arrive to the moment they leave.

Hiring must be mission-aligned from the very first conversation. Credentials matter, but they are secondary to a candidate's understanding of and commitment to the Catholic mission of the school. New employees need mentors during their first year, not just an orientation packet. Faculty need meaningful professional development that builds both their craft and their commitment to Catholic education. They deserve to be observed regularly, given honest and supportive feedback, and celebrated for their vocation, not just evaluated for performance.

Retention rates tell a story, but only part of it. The more important question is whether retained staff are actively engaged in the school's mission or simply present. A thriving faculty culture is one where teachers learn from each other, have a voice in the school's future, and feel genuinely valued as professionals and as people. When faculty thrive, students thrive. The investment a school makes in its workforce is one of the highest-return investments it can make.

### KEY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ☒ Does hiring prioritize mission alignment, not just credentials?
- ☒ Are new faculty provided with mentors during their first year?
- ☒ Are faculty provided meaningful professional development opportunities to improve their craft and grow in their vocation?
- ☒ Are teachers given the opportunity to learn from each other through PLCs, teacher work days, and collaborative planning?
- ☒ Are all employees paid a fair and competitive salary?
- ☒ Are faculty provided planning time built into their schedule?
- ☒ Are teachers celebrated for their vocation as Catholic educators?
- ☒ Are faculty observations conducted on a regular basis, with follow-up conversations that are proactive and supportive rather than reactive?

## 4. Individual Student Growth

*Every Decision Starts With the Student*

Our students are why we exist. Without them, we have walls and empty desks. Every decision, every system, every policy must be rooted in one question: what is in the best interest of our students? Students are not a byproduct of a Catholic school's mission. They are the mission.

Catholic schools are called to serve each student holistically, academically, socially, spiritually, morally, physically, and emotionally. Individual growth is not about everyone getting an A or scoring a 100%. It is about every student growing from where they started. Financial constraints must never prevent a student from accessing a Catholic education. Students with disabilities, learning differences, and diverse learning styles deserve classrooms that are designed to meet them, not just sort them.

Growth looks different for every student, and measuring it requires looking beyond paper and pencil tests. Faith should not be confined to religion class. It should be present across every content area, in every conversation, and in how students are treated every day. Catholic schools also have a responsibility to prepare students for life beyond graduation. That means developing young people of character, faith, and service who carry the school's mission with them long after they leave. The most important question a Catholic school educator can ask is not "did my students master the content?" It is "did I teach my students, or just my subject?"

### KEY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ☒ Are students met where they are from the moment they enroll?
- ☒ Does the admissions process help the school understand each prospective student as an individual?
- ☒ Are students challenged to grow from where they started, not just measured against a single standard?
- ☒ Do teachers look beyond paper and pencil tests to assess and celebrate student growth?
- ☒ Are students with learning differences provided appropriate support and accommodations?
- ☒ Are classrooms open to different learning styles, not just the preferred style of the teacher?
- ☒ Is faith integrated across all content areas, not just religion class?
- ☒ Are students recognized for character and growth as well as academic achievement?
- ☒ Does the school offer extracurricular activities that support whole-child development?
- ☒ Does the school celebrate student milestones and achievements publicly and intentionally throughout the year?
- ☒ Do we teach subjects, or do we teach students?

## 5. Operational Vitality

### *Sustainability in Service of Mission*

A Catholic school cannot serve its mission if it cannot sustain itself. Operational Vitality is the engine that keeps everything else running. It covers the systems, strategies, and stewardship that keep a school financially healthy, fully enrolled, and well-positioned for the future. Without strong operations, even the most mission-driven school will struggle to survive.

Enrollment is the lifeblood of a Catholic school. Recruitment, retention, and re-enrollment are not separate from advancement, they are central to it. Schools need to be proactive about setting enrollment goals three to five years out, tracking why families choose the school, and equally important, tracking why they leave. A school that does not know why it is losing students cannot fix the problem.

Advancement goes far beyond a single fundraising event. The most sustainable Catholic schools build a culture of giving, one where alumni, current families, parishes, and community members believe in the school's mission enough to invest in it year after year. This requires a structured annual fund with clearly communicated goals, meaningful donor stewardship, and public recognition of those who give. Every dollar raised should be accounted for and reported transparently through an annual report shared with all stakeholders.

A school's brand is its story. The most financially healthy Catholic schools are also the ones that tell their story well, to prospective families, to parishioners, to alumni, and to the wider community. Marketing should not be seasonal. It should be consistent, mission-driven, and present throughout the year. If a prospective family cannot quickly and clearly articulate why your school is different, the school has a brand problem.

#### KEY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ☒ Does the school have a strategic advancement plan that goes beyond a single fundraising event?
- ☒ Does the school have both operating and maintenance financial reserves?
- ☒ Is the school tracking retention rates annually, with a goal of 93% or above?
- ☒ Does the school have a structured annual fund with clearly communicated goals and donor recognition?
- ☒ Are major donors stewarded and thanked in a meaningful and personal way?
- ☒ Does the school publish an annual report that shares how all funds were raised and used?
- ☒ Does the school have a clearly defined brand that families and parishioners can articulate?
- ☒ Is the school marketing itself consistently throughout the year, not just during open house season?
- ☒ Are communication strategies reviewed annually for effectiveness and transparency?

## 6. Leadership

*Vision Over Maintenance, Always*

Leadership in a Catholic school extends far beyond the principal's office. It includes the pastor, the administrative team, faculty in leadership roles, parent organization leaders, and student leaders. Every one of these people carries responsibility for moving the mission forward. Leadership is not a title. It is a commitment to the school's mission, lived out every day in every decision.

The most important distinction EAS makes is this: leaders drive vision, managers complete tasks. Both are necessary, but schools that are led by managers instead of leaders tend to drift toward maintenance rather than mission. The goal is to move from alignment to integration. Alignment means everyone agrees on the mission. Integration means the mission shows up in every hire, every meeting, every decision, and every dollar spent. When a school reaches integration, leadership becomes proactive rather than reactive, and the mission stops being something that is talked about and starts being something that is lived.

Strong leadership requires regular collaboration between the principal and pastor, a strategic plan with clear benchmarks, open and honest communication, and the courage to have crucial conversations. Leaders who ask for feedback, who are visible in classrooms and at community events, and who model the Catholic culture they expect from others build schools that people trust, believe in, and want to be part of.

### KEY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ☒ Do the principal and pastor collaborate regularly and operate from a shared vision for the school?
- ☒ Does the school have a strategic plan with clear goals and benchmarks, and is it reviewed and updated on a regular basis?
- ☒ Do leaders understand the difference between leading and managing, and are they consistently focused on mission over maintenance?
- ☒ Is the principal visible in the community, in classrooms, and at school events on a regular basis?
- ☒ Does the school's culture allow for open, honest crucial conversations?
- ☒ Are meetings purposeful and focused on moving the mission forward, or do they feel like obligations?
- ☒ Is formal and informal feedback gathered from constituents at least annually?
- ☒ Are parents given regular access to school leadership beyond email, through events such as Coffee with the Principal, open door meetings, and community gatherings?
- ☒ Are faculty members given a voice in shaping the direction and future of the school?
- ☒ Are students given leadership opportunities within the school, such as student council, peer mentoring, or service roles?

## You Were Called to Lead a Mission.

*We Help You Build the Systems to Sustain It.*

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Most Catholic school leaders are deeply committed to their mission. They love their students, their faculty, and their communities. But love for the mission is not enough on its own. Without strong leadership systems, a culture of advancement, and a clear enrollment strategy, even the most mission-driven school can find itself struggling to survive. Most school leaders were called to lead a mission, not manage an advancement operation. Yet enrollment, fundraising, and brand are often the difference between a school that thrives and one that closes.

That is where Elementary Advancement Solutions comes in. John Mihalyo founded EAS after more than 20 years in school administration, including 15 years as a Catholic school principal, because he kept hearing the same challenges from school leaders year after year: enrollment pressure, fundraising gaps, and leadership isolation. He built EAS to provide something different, a coaching-first company that meets leaders where they are and builds strategies unique to each school.

Since launching EAS, John has partnered with schools across 18 states and 3 countries. His clients have seen an average enrollment increase of 19.6% and more than one million dollars in new advancement revenue. Before founding EAS, John established two Advancement Offices, secured more than 1.8 million dollars in funding, and oversaw a six million dollar renovation project. He has collaborated with pastors, bishops, superintendents, and diocesan leaders across the country and has been a sought-after speaker at dioceses nationwide. EAS services may also be covered in full or in part through professional development funds, including Title II funding. Ask us how.

EAS works with schools through direct coaching, leadership and advancement audits, mastermind cohorts, and The Catholic School Leaders Podcast. Whether you are a principal navigating your first year, an advancement director building a program from scratch, or a veteran leader ready to take your school to the next level, there is a path forward. Working with EAS is not about a generic playbook. It is about building a strategy specific to your school, your community, and your mission.

*If any part of this framework revealed an area where your school needs support,  
that is not a coincidence. It is an invitation.*

### **Direct Coaching**

Personalized 1:1 coaching for advancement, enrollment, and leadership. John Mihalyo works directly with school leaders using more than 20 years of real-world Catholic school experience and the proven six-domain framework you just explored in this resource. This is not just time with a coach. It is a structured, hands-on partnership that combines a system that works with a deep understanding that every school is different, with its own culture, challenges, and opportunities. Together, we assess where your school is, identify the gaps, and build a strategy that is uniquely yours.

### **Leadership & Advancement Audits**

Sometimes you need an honest outside perspective before you can move forward. EAS audits give school leaders a structured, comprehensive assessment of their leadership practices or advancement systems. You will leave with a clear picture of your strengths, your gaps, and your next steps, grounded in real data and real-world Catholic school experience.

### **Mastermind Cohorts**

Leadership can be lonely. Mastermind Cohorts bring together 6 to 10 leaders in the same career area for biweekly video sessions focused on growth, accountability, and shared wisdom. Groups are available for principals, advancement directors, enrollment directors, and aspiring administrators. You will not just learn. You will grow alongside people who understand exactly what you are facing.

### **The Catholic School Leaders Podcast**

The Catholic School Leaders Podcast covers it all, including leadership, advancement, enrollment, faculty development, community engagement, and more. Each episode is built for Catholic school leaders and teachers who want practical, real-world insights to strengthen every area of their school. Tune in wherever you listen to podcasts.

## **Schedule a Free Call**

Schedule a free call with John Mihalyo to discuss where your school is today and how EAS can help you move forward. Every school is unique. Every strategy should be too.

[www.elementaryadvancement.com](http://www.elementaryadvancement.com)

john@elementaryadvancement.com | 919-633-4198